



## Social Norms, Mental Models and other Behavioural Drivers of Petty Corruption – *the Case of Rwanda*

Saba Kassa, Associate Researcher

Cosimo Stahl, Public Governance Specialist

Dr Claudia Baez Camargo, Head of Governance Research

This policy brief summarises the main findings and lessons learned from a research on corruption, social norms and behaviours in Rwanda. The findings show that, although Rwanda has successfully curbed corruption, favouritism continues to be used to secure preferential access to public health services. While the Rwandan experience illustrates how behavioural insights can effectively complement conventional anti-corruption approaches, further entry areas for deepening behavioural anti-corruption interventions are also identified.

### Introduction

Combatting corruption in the developing world has been a formidable challenge and the results and outcomes of conventional anti-corruption interventions continue to be modest at best, despite the many efforts of the international development community. In Rwanda though, thanks to the a zero-tolerance approach to corruption under the leadership of President Paul Kagame, remarkable improvements have been made and incidences of petty corruption are nowadays rare. In fact, according to leading indicators, Rwanda is one of the least corrupt African countries (2016 Transparency International's CPI, World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators).

In this regard, the potential of incorporating behavioural approaches to promote anti-corruption outcomes has generated great interest. What distinguishes a behavioural perspective from conventional anti-corruption prescriptions is the recognition that people often do not make "rational" cost-benefit decisions but are significantly influenced by social, cultural or other quasi-rational factors. Behavioural insights could increase the effectiveness of development interventions by taking into account the way in which local contexts and socio-cultural structures influence the propensity of individuals to engage in corruption.

Against this backdrop, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) through its East Africa Research Fund (EARF) commissioned the Basel Institute on Governance to conduct qualitative research exploring the utility of a behavioural approach to tackling petty corruption, which in Rwanda was conducted in collaboration with the Protestant University of Rwanda. This policy brief extracts the main research findings and policy lessons learned for the case of Rwanda as one of three East African countries under investigation.<sup>1</sup>

### Main Research Findings

The research reveals evidence that behavioural drivers can play a role in fuelling certain practices of petty corruption in Rwanda, particularly in the form of favouritism among members of social networks. Overall, other practices such as bribery, have become a rather rare occurrence. Rwandan health services are usually delivered to high standards and accessible for all, although few incidences of bribery were reported during the *ubudehe* categorisation and registration processes. In contrast, the police sector is still perceived as corrupt by research participants who reported incidences of bribery among traffic officers.

<sup>1</sup> The other countries were Tanzania and Uganda. For more detail, consult the comparative and country reports as well as the other two policy briefs associated to the project, accessible on [www.baselgovernance.org/publications/](http://www.baselgovernance.org/publications/).

Crucial *non*-behavioural factors that have contributed significantly to the remarkable improvements in governance and anti-corruption outcomes in Rwanda are grounded in the political will linked to the government of President Kagame. Under his leadership, anti-corruption has been prioritised as reflected in wide-ranging institutional reforms and development programmes that have successfully been implemented. These reforms have made public services accessible and affordable, while at the same time a zero-tolerance approach to corruption is enforced. This approach not only encompasses deterrence, monitoring, and strict sanctions but also incorporates a naming and shaming method that publicly exposes the names of individuals implicated in acts of corruption.

Notably, several of the anti-corruption policies implemented in Rwanda incorporate behavioural insights. In this regard, the Rwandan government has actively revived and formalised Rwandan traditional practices in many of the major government programmes also known as the home-grown solutions (Box 1). Aside from improving the lives of Rwandans, these development programmes and reforms are behaviourally anchored and grounded in practices of sociality by means of which traditional Rwandan values of integrity, accountability and solidarity are reinstated and diffused. Among Rwandan citizens this has come to instil a sense of national pride of what could be considered national policy achievements '*Made in Rwanda*'. It is not coincidental that levels of trust towards state actors, especially the office of the President, are high in Rwanda.

*Social networks* constitute the most salient behavioural factor related to sociality that reinforces practices of favouritism in Rwanda. Similar to neighbouring Tanzania and Uganda, social networks adopt practices that follow social norms of reciprocity and moral obligation to the group that underpin shared community ideals of social justice and group welfare. In the Rwandan context, the research suggests that favouritism is the only form of petty corruption that is practiced and tolerated among network members, although it is mostly limited to family and close friends. Other petty corrupt transgressions, such as bribery, are increasingly frowned upon.

### Box 1: The Rwandan success story: top-down anti-corruption mechanisms coupled with development programmes formalising social values and traditions

- Strong top-down anti-corruption mechanisms in the form of a zero-tolerance approach to corruption include harsh punishments, strong monitoring and strict enforcement, but also make use of behavioural *controls* of corruption. For instance, by publishing the names not only of the individuals implicated in crimes of corruption but of their parents and communities as well, thereby, incorporating considerations of social status and shaming into law enforcement.
- *Ubudehe* is a traditional Rwandan practice that represented social values of compassion and solidarity by means of community activities involving assistance to the most needy among community members with their day-to-day tasks. Today, the *ubudehe* social programme regulates the categorisation of citizens by income level, whereby the poorest receive health benefits for free and other targeted subsidies.
- *Imihigo* referred to a traditional practice whereby community members would set collective goals to which each individual community member would commit and be held accountable for. *Imihigo* today is a key public management instrument in the form of performance contracts that reward high performers in service delivery and engages community members to realise national development goals.
- During the kingdom of Rwanda, *Itorero* was a school of excellence for its youth and where a selected few were taught moral and intellectual skills. The *itorero* programme today organises scholarly retreats across all strata where values of integrity, creativity and innovation are taught.

As in the neighbouring countries, network pressures often generate conflictive normative pressures for public officials who are expected to provide special favours to their families but are also nonetheless compelled to uphold their official duties particularly given the presence of strong vertical monitoring and sanctioning mechanisms.

In order to accommodate both the formal constraints and the informal demands placed by social networks, Rwandan service providers usually find ways to satisfy the needs of their respective social network members that would not affect the quality and delivery of services: for example, health care providers often attend to the needs of close family and friends outside service hours or during less busy times.

### Box 2: Behavioural drivers of petty corruption in Rwanda

- *Social network dynamics*, based on values of reciprocity and moral obligation towards the group, may reproduce the collective practice of favouritism among reference networks of family and close friends, but not without generating conflicting demands among Rwandan officials and service providers.
- Gift-giving, although socio-culturally prescribed and anchored, remains potentially problematic as it may compromise impartial and prompt service delivery.

The evidence provided by the Rwandan case study points to *two* important attributes about social networks that have implications for the East African region as a whole: firstly, the functionality of extensive social networks is

correlated with quality of and access to public services. Whereas informal social networks in other countries are extensive because they constitute an informal social safety net in the face of deficient public services, in Rwanda social networks need not be built instrumentally to compensate for failing state performance. Secondly, essential social values and norms that underpin practices of the networks can be harnessed to promote better social outcomes. Research findings suggest that strongly held regards to acts of reciprocity could take a different meaning when an individual's corrupt action can have negative consequences for the group. Reciprocity in this context keeps people from hurting each other by avoiding illegal actions, whereby the culprit in a crime of corruption could bring shame and dishonour to family and community.

Gift-giving is another potentially problematic practice that is rooted in Rwandan sociality and culture but may compromise impartial service delivery. This is mostly due to the high ambivalence attached to this practice, which traditionally instils a sense of indebtedness by the recipient of the gift based on strong norms of reciprocity.

## Policy Recommendations

On the basis of the empirical research findings, the following policy entry points are proposed:

### *Testing behavioural approaches to anti-corruption.*

Developing interventions based on the evidence concerning behavioural drivers of corruption is a promising avenue for complementing conventional anti-corruption approaches. Such behavioural interventions should be conceived to target and even harness the local context and understandings – including social norms and collective beliefs – which shape incentives, attitudes and expectations regarding corruption. Designing anti-corruption behavioural interventions involves identifying shifts (or nudges) in the environment or in the information that is shared with individuals that will motivate decision-making that supports better control of corruption outcomes.

It should be underscored that, although a number of behavioural interventions have proven effective in experimental settings, the practice of incorporating behavioural considerations into policy making to improve macro level socio economic outcomes is still very much in a nascent stage. There are no blueprints to predicting what nudges people will respond to and in what way, which means that a) behavioural interventions should be rigorously piloted and assessed and b) practitioners should be ready to experiment and test different

approaches to find those most effective in bringing about social change in a given context.

- **Develop and rigorously test pilot behavioural interventions that apply different nudges to elicit decision-making that breaks habits of corruption and reinforces the sustainability of the gains achieved.**

### *Recognising the strong moral imperatives of social networks and their role in reproducing favouritism*

Despite strong top-down oversight and monitoring mechanisms, favouritism continues to be an issue in the health sector due to social norms prescribing the obligation to help one's reference group. Service providers, who are located at the crossroads of the formal legal order and the informal social normative framework, understand and experience first-hand the tensions and contradictions that emanate from the demands exerted by their social networks. In this regard, the fact that favouritism is fuelled by strong expectations about obligation and reciprocity can be harnessed to develop public educational campaigns that convey the message that foregoing social demands of undue preferential treatment from service providers is for the benefit of all – including the community and family themselves – as doing so ensures to protect the reputation and ultimately the employment of family members.

- **Support a media 'edutainment' campaign that uncovers the hidden costs of favouritism and reinforces the recognition that public officials cannot use their position to favour anyone regardless of feelings of affection, belonging or solidarity. Stories could be emphasised where favouritism leads to the guilty provider being shamed and losing his/her job and thereby inflicting much greater costs on the family in the long-run.**

### *Addressing gift-giving*

Gift-giving is another socially grounded practice that can become problematic when taking place in contexts of public service provision. It should therefore be limited and confined to the private sphere.

- **Educational campaigns could inform citizens that reciprocation in the form of gift-giving for a public service they are entitled to as Rwandan citizens is not necessary or even potentially harmful. A catchy slogan that reinforces the message in the media could be complemented by physical symbols at the workplace. For example, during an intervention in Serbia, service providers were requested to wear pins, which stated "I work for the salary, not for the gift!"**

### *Revisiting traffic violation regulations*

The research has shown that many traffic violators resorted to bribery in order to avoid overly high sanctions of minor traffic violations, such as speeding. High fines for traffic violations come out strongly as perhaps generating unnecessary corruption risks.

- **Consider the revision of fines associated with minor traffic violations and/or introduce a four-tier system of fines according to income/ubudehe category.**

### *Addressing sexual corruption*

The research findings show that women are particularly vulnerable to sexual corruption. Sexual favours can be extorted but can also be initiated by females as a problem-solving strategy. While it is important to further clarify whether in such cases both parties should be criminalised, it is of utmost importance to raise awareness about the severity and implications of engaging in sexual corruption. Such acts could be framed as particularly shameful to heighten the social stigma associated with such behaviours.

- **Raise costs – in terms of criminal sanctions and social shaming – of soliciting or accepting sexual favours on the part of male public officials.**
- **Establish safe whistle-blower mechanisms for women to denounce unwanted sexual advances preferably linked to a strong, positive female role model.**

### Lessons for Practitioners

- The functionality and pragmatic considerations informing the engagement in corruption as a means to 'getting things done' is irrelevant in a context in which the quality of and access to public services is adequately ensured.
- Conflicting normative frameworks, arising from the need to adhere to formal legal rules and the obligation to fulfil informal social demands exerted by members of the network, should be acknowledged and addressed.
- Although gift-giving is a socially-embedded cultural practice, in the context of the public sector it is inappropriate as it may result in compromised and impartial service delivery.
- While social networks relying on norms of reciprocity and moral obligations to the group can give incentives to engage in corrupt behaviours such as favouritism; the same network properties may be harnessed for favourable anti-corruption outcomes.
- The formalisation of social values and traditions '*Made in Rwanda*' in development programmes that instil values of integrity, accountability and solidarity and deter corruption serve as a prominent example to other African countries.

Dr Saba Kassa, Basel Institute on Governance, Steinenring 60, 4051 Basel, Switzerland, [saba.kassa@baselgovernance.org](mailto:saba.kassa@baselgovernance.org)

Mr Cosimo Stahl, Basel Institute on Governance, Steinenring 60, 4051 Basel, Switzerland, [cosimo.stahl@baselgovernance.org](mailto:cosimo.stahl@baselgovernance.org)

Dr Claudia Baez-Camargo, University of Basel, Basel Institute on Governance, Steinenring 60, 4051 Basel, Switzerland, [claudia.baez-camargo@baselgovernance.org](mailto:claudia.baez-camargo@baselgovernance.org)



The Basel Institute on Governance is an Associated Institute of the University of Basel.



In collaboration with  
the Protestant  
University of Rwanda

This document is an output from a project funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) through the Research for Evidence Division (RED) for the benefit of developing countries. However, the views expressed and information contained in it are not necessarily those of or endorsed by DFID, which can accept no responsibility for such views or information or for any reliance placed on them.

